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Canyon de Chelley

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Canyon de Chelley

by
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Journalism 2

Ears up, the pronghorn buck circled below the knoll where I stood. I'd been watching him for an hour and he'd been watching me for slightly longer. I stood perfectly still, knowing his curiosity would drive his good sense to the limit and force him to me.

I stood expectantly, watching the direction I knew he would come from (upwind and out of sight) straining my ears to hear the crunch of sharp hooves in the volcanic ash.

Time passed slowly, like an old woman uphill, and I tired of waiting and decided to go back to the mill. I thought about turning, began to turn, turned, and he was there. Without stretching my arm I could have touched the wet black nose that quivered in the Arizona sun. Eyes gazed into mine with the complete gentleness of age and wisdom, through his horns the sacred mountain was framed against the sky.

For perhaps a minute, which seemed like an hour, we stood like a primitive advertisement for snake oil, broadcasting signals and stories of ages past, hawking bottled history in graduated doses of success and failure, scenting the bitter with sweet antelope essence.

I looked down. I had to. This was a lot more than I had bargained for. Antelope dialogue and medicine shows were new to me and not at all what I had planned for the afternoon.

The buck shook his head in a very antelope manner and deliberately turned his back to me. He walked away in measured pronghorn steps, counting to himself until the thirty-fourth hoofbeat that landed him on the rim of a dry creek bed. He began to look back, thought better of it, and disappeared in one bound.

I looked down for the second time that afternoon and licked my lips. I could count the thirty-four hoof prints to the edge of the creek, and did so. I looked up at the sacred mountain and saw the sun shining white fire on the snow

covered peaks, glaring down to bake the ancient ruins of stone that rose beside and behind me. As I watched, the sun grew brighter, and from its rim a glow emerged and grew to a giant ring around the blazing star, a pulsating ring that threatened to rise bigger and brighter than the sun itself, then expired.

I decided to look straight ahead this time; it seemed safest. I could see the mill, and there was nothing between it and me but the scrub desert and the ruins, of course.

It was a small victory, but necessary—I'd seen enough for one afternoon.

As a saw mill it really wasn't all that functional. The parts were there, but time and weather had scattered the rusted blades and rails like the bones of that last American buffalo, leaving a skeleton framework of old logging cabins and scrap wood. A little time and it could have been a mill again, but the owners were content to leave it be and hire my wife and me to sell off the scrap wood to the Navajo Indians that lived all around us.

With squeals and shouts and usually barking, truckloads of Navajos in varying states of intoxication would rattle off the main road and work their way down the path to our mill at the base of the ageless Canyon de Chelly.

We would laugh and shake hands and shout "Ya-ta-hey!" at each other in very loud voices in the traditional way of the old ones; the children would play on the wood piles and the dogs would piss on everything as the parents and I began to cheat each other.

We'd multiply our fates with stubby pencils on warping two-by-fours and I'd give them the news and await the complicated ritual that was to follow. The men would freeze, as if body and soul had become solid as Lot's wife; the women would curse under their breaths and say "Anglo!" the same way you would say the word "manure." I would wait for the theatrics to end and cut five dollars off the price (I'd added it on the first time) and we'd all laugh again and drink syrupy Twister wine from green pint bottles and squint down the canyon and talk about the old ones and their ruins.

The ruins were still sacred to the Navajo. They were like a skeleton key to the old ways, when the Navajo called

themselves "The Diné" (The People) and they lived with pride and power, a strong right arm of the Apache nation.

The first Diné travelled from world to world through the stem of a hollow reed, stopping here and there until they reached northern Arizona, emerging from a badger hole in the mountains of southwestern Colorado. They would laugh when they told me this part, but the oldest among them never laughed, and would look sharply at me to see if I did.

Days passed into months and the canyon grew green and fertile with the rains of fall. We played our roles to the utmost (obedient anachronisms that we were) and aged in the canyon's shadow like wood, warping and waving.

Somehow (carefully) I managed not to think (well, not much) about my antelope afternoon.

It was October before I learned, before the ghosts and ashes revealed themselves reluctantly.

I watched the pick-up work its way quietly down the path to our mill. It was older than most, and for a while it seemed as though the descent would last forever and the truck would pass right on by the canyon floor and merge with the dust below. It didn't.

I could see as it pulled up to the first wood pile that the passengers were Zuni. The differences between the Zuni and the Navajo are important, but not to Anglos. They shook my hand, an old woman first and then her husband, and they said "Ya-ta-hey," very quietly and with great wisdom. They had come for some scrap wood to build a lambing pen and I told them the price (without the extra five added on) and they paid in cash and without drama. They sat in the shade and rested before whipping the truck back up the canyon and our talk turned (as I'd hoped it might) to the ruins that scattered themselves all around us.

"Yes," they said (as the Navajo had said before them) "They are of the Diné and they are sacred" (as the Navajos had also told me—this was as far as I ever got in these conversations).

I nodded my head and looked amazed, like it was the first time I had ever heard that bit of information, and got up to leave them to their silent shade. I thought about standing, started to stand, stood, and he was there again.

Silently and gently, the pronghorn buck had slipped up to hear our non-conversation. He looked at me knowingly, as if we shared some enormous practical joke, and walked past me to look at the Zunis. He met the gaze of the old man and stood for a moment near him before walking (sixty-eight steps) to the stream that flowed through the canyon.

He turned as he reached the water and waited. I had a very uneasy feeling about the sun and I decided that, all things considered, I wouldn't look up and I wouldn't look down. I focused my eyes as nearly horizontal as I could and hoped for the best.

The old Zuni began to talk.

He told a story of a better time, when the red hills and the Great Canyon had never seen the iron shod hooves of the American cavalry and the Navajo lived gently with their sheep grazing the canyons and draws of the painted desert. Whites were just a distant legend of wealth and magic weapons.

"It was Manuelito," old Zuni said, stuffing a short pipe with coarse tobacco. "He was chief of the Diné when the pony soldiers first came. My grandfather was big medicine man for Zuni and taught Manuelito the Snake-way."

I'd heard of the Zuni 'Snake-way', a mystical enchantment; darkened underground kivas choked with smoke and the stink of a hundred bodies, steady chanting while peyote illuminates the walls and paints a halo around the Dancer, holding a ten-foot diamondback rattlesnake in his teeth as he spins his power beneath the approving eyes of the elders, the snake powerless beneath the gods of the desert.

"Manuelito was a great leader," the old man said. "He cared for the old women and kept the peach trees full and alive. The trees were sacred to the Diné, they were a gift from Those Who Came From the South—the Conquistadors. The peaches were the pride of the People."

From the creek, the buck snorted and tossed his rack with impatience. The old Zuni looked at him as if he were a little boy that had spoken out of turn. The buck sighed and wandered down the stream.

"The whites did it," the old man said. "Nothing against you, my friend (his wife snorted and spit in my general direction); they rigged a horse race so Manuelito would lose. The soldiers wanted to cheat the People and when the Diné saw

what happened they approached the fort of the soldiers to protest.

"It was a very sad thing. The soldiers were afraid, the People were many, maybe two hundred, maybe more; little children, old women, everyone unarmed. The fort had a mountain howitzer that the soldiers carefully aimed into the middle of the People. They fired twice, then again and again, killing the little, the old, the innocent. It was the start of years of fighting—Manuelito never forgot."

The old woman sprang to her feet with amazing dexterity, crossing the six or so feet between us in a matter of seconds and landing a hard, moccasined foot just below my knee.

"Aye! You crazy old woman," the old Zuni waved his arms and a huge dispute in violent Zunese ended with old woman sitting in the truck.

I thought I heard a snort that sounded an awful lot like a laugh from down by the creek.

Old Zuni cleared his throat. "The fighting lasted for many years until the soldiers brought in their greatest warrior. The Diné called him 'Rope Thrower' and trusted him because he had traded with them in the early days. The soldiers called him Kit Carson.

"Rope Thrower knew the only way to beat the Diné was through their stomachs. He cut their huge cornfields and trampled their vegetables, then he cut the peach trees.

"The first tree fell.

"The Diné crawled from their hiding places in the canyon walls and watched. Their weapons were gone; they had fought too hard and too long.

"The second tree fell.

"The People screamed and cursed and threw rocks and bits of wood at them from the canyon's rim.

"Without food, they were beaten. Manuelito turned his people over to Rope Thrower. 'I will make peaceful farmers of you,' Carson said. The soldiers herded the People together and began to push them, on foot, across all of Arizona and New Mexico to the barren reservation of the Bosque Redondo. When they reached the Bosque, half the People were gone—laying dead on the trail of the long walk. After three years of

suffering at Bosque, the soldiers walked them back to Arizona. They said, 'We are sorry if we caused you any trouble—here are two hundred goats'.

"The ruins are of the Diné," the old man said. "They are a reminder of the long walk. They are sacred."

I watched as the Zuni truck struggled back up the canyon wall and closed my eyes and saw them. Starving and nearly naked, I saw them throwing rocks at the soldiers as the holy trees fell. I saw them leave their parents and grandparents to die on the trail of the long walk. I saw that the pregnant women died first, then the crippled and the sick. I saw the quirts strike the backs of the hot-blooded young men.

I squeezed my eyes tighter. I'd seen enough—too much, but it was still there. The soldiers were hacking down the cornfields, the kivas were burning, the cannon fired again and again.

When I opened my eyes again, he was back. He saw me looking and the buck whirled and ran and waited, looking back for me. Why not?

I followed as quickly as I could. He seemed frustrated at my inept feet and tossed his head again with impatience. I hurried, hot and sweaty, down the canyon, reached a small rise and saw the pronghorn had stopped.

He looked at me again. With his head held high, he paced the story from start to finish. With dips and intricate footwork, he told of the old ones in antelope prose. He finished with an obvious air of relief, as if he was glad to be just another antelope again, and trotted off.

His footprints in the volcanic ash sang to me still. Seventeen here, thirty-four there, sixty-eight over there a ways, one hundred thirty-six prints along the stream in twelve even rows—he had stepped off their locations. The antelope headstone of every dead peach tree. On my knees (somehow) I pushed my hands into the hard volcanic ash, to find (as I should have known) the soft cremation, the worldly remains, the ashes of the peach trees.